

### ***The Moron Trail***

In the name of him who is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption; dear friends in Christ: This morning's Epistle lesson, taken from St. Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, continues the apostle's exhortation that we considered last week. So, to fully comprehend what he's saying in this section, it's necessary that we back up and review a bit. You may recall that the church at Corinth was a house divided. The members of the congregation had aligned themselves into competing factions, each group claiming superiority to the others by virtue of their supposed devotion to some well-known personality in the early church. Some were saying they were followers of Paul; others said that they followed Peter or Apollos. Still another group tried to trump the rest of them by saying, "Forget those guys; we follow Christ." (They didn't really; but that's what they said.) These factions were struggling for control of the leadership and direction of the congregation based on what they perceived to be the relative merits of man they claimed as their own special teacher.

How did they ever get such a crazy idea into their heads, that one's standing in the church is determined by the name of the apostle or pastor whose teachings they claimed to adhere to? It's really not hard to understand. They simply borrowed the notion from the world they lived in. You see, there were at that time a number of popular philosophical schools of thought or ways of thinking about the world and mankind's place in it. You had the views, for example, of Aristotle, Plato, Socrates, Zeno, and Epicurus, to name but a few. And people would consider these different philosophical systems, pick the one they liked the best, and then argue incessantly with people who espoused any of the other views – not unlike the way conservatives, moderates, and liberals argue about things today – the main difference being that the various points of view were so closely associated with the names of the particular philosopher who first taught them. Oddly enough, something very similar was going in Jewish religious circles of that era; but instead of people identifying themselves with famous philosophers, the Jews lined up under revered Rabbis who were known for their own particular brand of biblical interpretation. So, while the Greeks argued their philosophy, the Jews argued about their religion – all under the banner of the name of the philosopher or Rabbi whose ideas they thought were the best.

Well now in the early church you had a combination of both Greeks and Jews who were well accustomed to this way of thinking—and arguing. Mostly arguing because the arguments never went anywhere. They weren't supposed to. They weren't about trying to resolve differences and come to a peaceful settlement of the issues involved. No, they were more about the need people have to feel superior to the next guy – to have bragging rights. It was "I'm smarter than you because I follow this guy" or collectively "We're smarter than you because our teacher and his system is better than yours. We can't believe how foolish you are not to see the error of your ways. This is proof that we're wiser, better educated, and more sophisticated than you. And that makes us a better class of Christian than you – so sit down, shut up, and listen to what we say." That's what it was about. And it was tearing the church at Corinth apart.

As we heard last week, Paul really took them to the woodshed about it. "Is Christ divided?" he asked them. "Was I crucified for you? Were any of you baptized into my name?" No! There is only one Christ, only one Baptism, only one Christian Church, only one Gospel of redemption, and only one true confession of whom Jesus is and what he did to save us. Who cares who taught you the truth? Let there be no divisions among you. You are all to say the

same thing and to be united in one mind and judgment about Jesus Christ and his Gospel of salvation.

And now as we heard in today's lesson, Paul proceeds to pull the plug on the notion that anyone in the church can claim some kind of superior intelligence for the way in which they understand the Gospel. "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing", he says. Listen to what he's saying: The Gospel we believe, the Gospel that saves us, is utter nonsense to the world. From the world's point of view, that is, according to the best human reason and sharpest minds, the message of Christ crucified for sinners doesn't make sense. In fact the word that is translated "folly" or "foolishness" in today's text is literally "moronic". It means stupid or idiotic. Paul is saying that the Way of Life, the path of Christianity, is the really the Moron Trail: only the foolish walk upon it – at least, that's the way the world sees it.

Why would he say that? Well, think it through: what is it we believe? Let's see: that the one, holy, all powerful and eternal God decided to create all things seen and unseen – not for himself, mind you, he didn't need any of it; no, he did it all for us. And this same God, who strangely exists in three distinct persons each of whom is 100% God, not a third of him, and yet the persons are not to be confused in any way—this God did all this for us knowing full well that we would rebel against him, turn away, and pursue lives of depravity, sin, and self destruction – justly earning for ourselves eternal suffering under his righteous judgment. But not to worry, from the beginning God had a plan. He would send one person of his divine Trinity, the Son, into this world to become a human like the rest of us, who would then live a perfect life on our behalf and take upon himself the combined penalty we justly deserved because of our rebellion against him. Then, after suffering and dying as a despised criminal in our place, he would rise again to declare the redemption price paid, so that everyone who believes this (you don't have to do anything: just trust that Christ did it all) gets to live with God forever in glory. Oh, and if you're wondering why God embarked upon this whole thing that cost him so dearly, it can be summed up in one word: love.

Now, perhaps because you and I are walking the Moron Trail and have been for some time, we don't see how preposterous all that is. But try seeing from the outside, like a pagan Greek would, or as someone raised in the Jewish faith. Such people would take it for granted that it is the duty of man to serve the gods, or for the Jew, to serve the one true God. Christianity, by contrast, tells of a God who serves mankind – and who allows himself to be humiliated, tortured and abused by men. And again the pagan and Jew alike assume that the gods (or the one God) reward those who do noble things and punish those who offend them. The Christian faith tells of a God who punishes the only One who was truly righteous and lets those who offend him go free—no, more than that, he exalts them and raises them to glory. You see, almost everything about the Christian faith contradicts human reason – the way we would naturally expect things to be.

Just listen to what Jesus is saying in what are called the Beatitudes, statements that are cherished as some of the most sublime truths of the Christian faith: "Blessed are the poor in spirit ..." Yeah, right: don't you feel blessed when you're depressed and feeling worthless – when your self esteem is completely crushed? "Blessed are those who mourn ..." Of course, I really look forward to those times when I suffer painful losses. Don't you? Oh, here's a good one: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Right; I've noticed that's the way it works out: those who allow themselves to be pushed around and let others step on them, they usually come out on top. Huh? Oh, they get better toward the end. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake ..." Uh huh: isn't it terrific when you do what's right and everyone attacks you for it? And then the capstone: "Blessed are you when others revile you

and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account ..." Hear that? We're being persecuted. Woo-Hoo! Everybody hates us because we're Christians! Isn't it grand? Now granted, Jesus explains these statements. He shows that there is a blessing in each Beatitude, albeit a delayed one; but on the surface what he calls blessed is everything we want to avoid. We don't want to be poor in spirit or mournful or meek or persecuted. Christianity seems to have everything backwards.

Exactly so, Paul explains; that's the way the Lord in his wisdom wants it to be. Why? Precisely so that no one can do the sort of competitive, prideful boasting and arguing that was tearing the church at Corinth apart. Faith in the Gospel isn't a matter of being smarter or more sophisticated than the next guy. No one thinks himself into the kingdom on account of his superior wit. No, faith comes by the working of the Holy Spirit and the power of God *in opposition* to what seems to be smart and sophisticated to human beings. Faith comes when the word of Christ crucified for sinners is proclaimed and God through that foolish preaching creates in the sinner a new heart that can receive and trust in the forgiveness he declares.

Mankind in his wisdom looks for God in what is attractive and successful and strong. We look for him to take pleasure in our great achievements, our tremendous sacrifices, and in our grand philosophical systems that neatly provide all the answers to life's most perplexing questions. But what did that get us? In ancient times, it gave us all the false religions of the nations; all their idols and temples adorned in gold, their pyramids and lavish tombs by which they hoped to cheat death. They didn't work. Among the Jews, it gave us a legalistic interpretation of the sacred Scriptures – one that said by obeying all these rules and regulations you can earn your way into the heart of God and be rewarded by him. That doesn't work either. In modern times it gives us brilliant men like Stephan Hawkings and Richard Dawson, who imagine the universe can be explained without any need for God. They say first there was nothing, then all matter spontaneously leapt into existence without any initial cause, and then it ordered itself into the universe, and through countless eons of time and infinite circumstances of chance it created life and intelligence as we know it. This they have the temerity to call wisdom and learning – the peak of human intelligence. And many wise and learned people believe them.

But what I want you to see is that all of this is ultimately about glorifying man. It's about our works, our wisdom, and our accomplishments. It doesn't bring glory to God. It pushes him out of the equation. It erases the need for him. And if there's no God, that leaves us in charge – which was what the first sin was all about. We wanted to be like God. It's the same old rebellion repackaged.

Therefore, because mankind in his wisdom looks for God in grand things, God hides himself in what is unattractive, what looks like failure, and what is weak. We find God not high and exalted standing before us in glory; but as a baby in a manger, an itinerate preacher speaking to a crowd on a hillside, and in a condemned criminal suffering on a cross. We don't reach up to God with our great achievements and tremendous sacrifices. Instead God reaches down to us with his achievements and the sacrifice of his Son. As Paul says, God picks the foolish things, the despised things, the things that are not in order to bring all human boasting to an end. He does it to humble us all. He does it to level the field, so to speak, so that none of us can claim anything before God – or before each other.

And this is the way he continues to operate in the world. He puts his powerful word of forgiveness not in a super saint, but in the mouth of a miserable sinner like me. He puts the miraculous washing of renewal and recreation not in some spectacular miracle, but in a couple

handfuls of water and a few simple words. He puts the body and blood of his Son given and shed for you not in a tremendous display of heavenly glory, but in a wafer of bread and a sip of wine. He presents his truth to you through pastors and teachers, not with words of eloquent wisdom and articulate knowledge that only the sharpest minds can comprehend; but in a message so simple that any child can grasp it and that anyone of us can share.

And he puts us here together on the Moron Trail in his church, in order that we may help each other along the way – not competing, not arguing, not striving for supremacy, because none of us deserves to be here – but assisting, encouraging, loving each other, and forgiving each other's sins, for in this the wisdom and power of our God is revealed to his praise and to his glory alone. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***